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AUTHOR Phillips, John; Cribbs, Diane
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ABSTRACT

In an effort to address both the interests of Khmer and Vietnamese refugee students and the experiences of refugees making the adjustment to life in the United States, the Galang Refugee Processing Center developed a social language unit to add to the curriculum. The unit is designed to teach students socially appropriate ways to make and communicate with friends. The English-speaking Indonesian teachers at the center, most of whom have not been to the United States, are trained in the language used in the unit and in the subtle features of American culture underlying the language use. Simulation and role-playing, recorded on viedotape, are used to train the teachers. Also, in response to teacher interest in additional information, handouts containing a variety of dialogues were prepared and distributed. Classroom games and situation cards were also developed for teacher training and classroom use. A result of the unit's inclusion has been more social language use outside the classroom at the refugee center. (MSE)

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Meeting Friends and Bumming Cigarettes: Training Teachers to Teach Social Language

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Jon Phillips and Diane Cribbs
Galang Refugee Processing Center

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This article describes the creation of the new Social Language unit that has been added to the curriculum of the English as a Second Language component at Galang Refugee Processing Center. After giving a brief rationale for writing such a unit, the authors describe the subsequent training of Indonesian teachers to prepare them for teaching the material to Southeast Asian refugees bound for resettlement in the U.S. The article concludes with suggestions the teachers made as a result of their first experience teaching the unit to their students.

Among the questions we encounter most often from refugee students at the Galang Refugee Processing Center are, "How do I meet people in America?" and, "How can I make friends?" Stateside reports on resettlement problems and comments we receive from resettled refugees themselves suggest that, even after they have lived in the U.S. for several months, many adult refugees have no idea how to make friends, or that they attempt to do so in culturally inappropriate ways. Although most may learn enough English through the ESL curriculum to handle their basic needs, they often feel alienated and lonely. Our students' anxious questions and our sense that they needed to learn certain social skills to help them adjust to their new home were the impetus for writing a new Social Language unit.

The unit is divided into self-contained parts, each concentrating on a separate language function. Students learn how to make small talk, give compliments and refuse an invitation – to name a few. As in all the other units that make up our curriculum, there is a progression from grammatically simple language to more complicated structures.

We believe that if our students are to use the language well, an understanding of the literal meaning of the words is not enough – they have to know when it is appropriate to use them. For example, when Vietnamese meet Americans on Galang for the first time, they tend to ask very personal questions such as, "Are you married?", "How old are you?" and "What is your religion?" In Vietnamese culture, such questions are entirely appropriate in an initial social encounter. In the context of U.S. society, a first meeting like this would most likely be the last. Therefore, we placed the functions in the context of everyday social encounters in which refugees are likely to find themselves. Cultural notes for teacher use are also available.

Training the Teachers

To prepare our Indonesian teachers to teach the new material to their Vietnamese and Khmer students, ESL supervisors planned a series of training sessions. All of the Indonesians hired to work in the ESL component are experienced teachers with an excellent command of the English language, although very few of them have been to

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the U.S. The objectives for the training were not only to familiarize the teachers with the function-specific language in each part of the unit, but also to allow them to gain an understanding of subtle features of American culture underlying the language.

The first training focused on when and where it is appropriate to speak to strangers and the kinds of places where people in the U.S. generally make friends. The teachers were asked to explain their understanding of the difference between "stranger," "acquaintance," and "friend." Such a starting point was basic but necessary, we felt, because basic concepts can never be assumed to have exact correspondences across cultural boundaries. For example, we discovered that in Indonesia it is acceptable to speak to strangers anywhere, such as standing in line or waiting for a bus, whereas in the U.S., attempts to be friendly with someone you don't know may be considered inappropriate behavior and cause for suspicion. It was necessary for our teachers to become familiar with the cultural difference underlying these concepts in order to teach the language in the unit effectively.

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The ESL supervisors followed up the introduction by acting out a series of role plays that demonstrated different language functions.

The teachers observed the following role plays:

1) A stranger at a bus stop asking for information
2) Neighbors requesting and offering assistance
3) Co-workers offering food during a break
4) A good friend refusing an invitation and making a counter offer
5) Parents at a playground making small talk and giving compliments about each other's children
6) Strangers at a party making small talk

The teachers were then asked to analyze each role play using these guide questions:

- What is the situation?
- What is the relationship between the two speakers?
- What degree of formality of language is used?

In this initial training, the teachers demonstrated a general understanding of the concepts involved and were able to analyze the role plays according to the guide questions. However, their ability to use the language appropriately would be the ultimate test of their understanding.

In preparation for the second training, we created a videotape of a series of American-style social encounters. This included the following situations:

1) A new employee making small talk on the job
2) Co-workers sharing food and information during a lunchbreak at work
3) Co-workers offering and refusing an invitation
4) Co-workers offering an invitation and making a counter offer
5) Co-workers accepting an invitation to dinner and offering to bring something
6) Friend offering to help clean up after dinner
7) Friend bumming a cigarette
8) Friends offering and accepting assistance
9) Friends borrowing something
10) Neighbors returning an item and making an invitation
11) Dealing with strangers at a bus stop

After a review of the first training, the entire videotape was presented to the teachers to give an overview of the functions included. Each vignette was then shown separately and discussed. The teachers were directed to:

- Identify the language function in each vignette.
- Identify the relationship of the people involved.
- Determine who initiated the conversation and the reason.
- Describe specific body language used by the actors.

The rationale for using the videotape as a training aid was two-fold: to present the specific language used to carry out each function, and to provide insight into the cultural features underlying the situations. In the course of a follow-up discussion, some basic cultural features were identified.

- Americans use small talk to "warm up" to an invitation or request.
- Americans do not make friends with total strangers.
- Americans usually make friends with acquaintances such as neighbors, classmates, fellow group or club members, and co-workers.
- Americans are activity oriented and often invite people to do something.
- Americans often bring something when going to dinner at a friend's house.
- Americans usually pay for themselves when eating out with friends.

One behavior that caused particular confusion was the use of small talk to lead into a conversation. The teachers understood the concept, but had trouble finding suitable topics for such talk and the language to use. To address this problem, we gave situation

cards to the teachers and directed them to act out specific social encounters. (See Figure 1.) The purpose was for the teachers to get a sense of American culture and to practice the language used in the interactions. We asked for two volunteers to do each role play. The actors were asked to keep in mind the role of small talk in leading up to specific language functions. Discussion based on the same questions used for the videotape followed the role plays.

Figure 1

Situation Cards

Sample 1

Teacher 1 receives card A:

There is a woman at work whom you would like to get to know better. Today she is wearing a new dress. You compliment her to start a conversation.

Teacher 2 receives card B:

You go to work wearing a new dress. A woman at work whom you would like to know better compliments your dress. You want to keep the conversation going.

Sample 2

Teacher 3 receives card A:

You are Indonesian. During your lunch break at work, you want to offer some of the Indonesian food you brought from home.

Teacher 4 receives card B:

You are American. You don't like to try new kinds of food when you don't know what's in them.

Although teachers were able to convey the basic functions, the language used sometimes seemed unnatural. We felt that it was necessary for teachers to use the function-specific language as part of a broader conversational flow that includes greetings, warm-up, expressing the function appropriately, responding and leave-taking. Since the teachers do this unconsciously in their daily encounters with the American staff, our training objective was to make them aware of what they already do. The teachers are familiar with the idea of asking clarification questions to acquire information. We asked them to carry this idea further and follow up a statement with a question to keep the conversation flowing.

To reinforce this idea and to provide an opportunity to practice, we introduced a language game called "Keep the Ball Rolling." The game proceeds as follows: the first person has a ball and begins the conversation by asking a question. He or she then throws the ball to someone else, who must answer the question and ask another before throwing the ball to another person. The game continues until everyone has had a turn or the conversation is completed. This activity helped the teachers understand the concept of keeping a conversation going by practicing ways to respond to small talk. It gave them a technique they could use with their students.

Providing Cultural Context

We were very aware that we were asking quite a bit of the teachers – that is, to teach language and behavior appropriate to certain contexts according to the norms of a culture that was not their own. When teaching social language, the teachers would need to convey the cultural aspects of the target language if they, in turn, were to help students to communicate effectively and appropriately in specific circumstances.

[One objective] for the training is to allow [the teachers] to gain an understanding of subtle features of American culture underlying the language.

Therefore, we provided a third training session to look at cultural aspects of communication and provide our teachers with additional practice. Again, in this training, paired cards with situations to be acted out were again used. This time, however, rather than two teachers acting out a situation, one Indonesian teacher and one American supervisor interacted and then exchanged roles. In this way, teachers practiced both initiating conversation and responding appropriately in the given situations. They gained experience in each role and, at the same time, observed how the American acted in each role. All of the situations were based on the language functions from the new unit, and we purposely kept them fairly simple. We also tried to relate the

situations closely to the teacher's own experiences on Galang. In the sample situation that follows, the stress is on small talk and keeping the conversation flowing naturally. As stated in the unit's cultural notes, appropriate topics to talk about are the weather, the supervisor's newness, and greetings. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

Situation Cards

Teacher (Card A)

It hasn't rained in Galang for 3 weeks, and the weather is extremely hot and dry. You're waiting to go to the movie theatre on the hill. You see the new American supervisor who arrived in Galang the day before. You hardly know him, but he seems like a nice guy. Go over and talk to him. (Be friendly.)

American Supervisor (Card B)

You are a new supervisor in Galang, waiting to go into the movie theatre on the hill. The weather is very hot and dry, and you feel physically uncomfortable. You see a teacher who is also waiting to see the movie. You don't know him very well, but he seems like a nice guy.

At this point, the teachers were ready for a trial run teaching the unit to their Vietnamese and Cambodian students.

Follow-up Training

After the teachers had taught the social language unit for the first time, the supervisors gathered their suggestions. Most teachers felt they needed more ideas for classroom activities that applied social language to specific situations. They also wanted more examples of small talk in short, realistic dialogues that could be used for practice in the classroom.

In response to this feedback from the teachers, the supervisors developed handouts containing dialogues of typical American small talk. Topics concerned work, health, weekend activities, and stating the obvious, e.g., "It's really hot today, isn't it?" or, "This is a great party, isn't it?

We also identified appropriate dialogues in various ESL textbooks and made the textbooks available to the teachers. The teachers particularly liked dialogues in which students practiced in pairs and each student received only half of a dialogue. Each student had to choose the appropriate reply, depending on what the partner said. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3

Dialogues of Choices

Person A	Person B
1. Hi _____. How are you?	1. a) Fine, thanks, and you? b) I'm good. You look very nice today.
2. a) I'm O.K. Could you help me with something? b) Oh! Thank you. I have a job interview this morning.	2. a) Sure. What do you want? b) Really? What job are you applying for?
3. a) Could you explain this to me? b) I want to be a cook.	3. a) Sure, I'm happy to help. b) Well, good luck to you.

These dialogues of choices encouraged students to listen carefully to their partners. Once they had established a topic to talk about, students could continue the dialogues as they chose.

Although the supervisors had made the videotape described above to train teachers, the teachers suggested it also be used in the higher-level classes as an introduction to the Social Language unit. Many used the videotape in their classrooms in the same way it had been presented to them. The students enjoyed watching the videotape, and teachers felt it helped clarify how and when to use the new language patterns being introduced. We also made a second version of the videotape to be shown in lower level classes. The same situations were depicted, but simpler language, taken directly from the A-B level materials, was used. Teachers were given transcripts of the videotape to help the students with review and practice.

Other activities developed for use with the Social Language unit were demonstrated during further

teacher-training sessions. The "Circle Game" is a lively activity that many teachers use in class. The objective of this activity is for students to realize that some responses can be used in many situations. Students sit in a circle, and everyone is given a flashcard with a response written on it. The teacher or another student makes an invitation, and the students who think they have appropriate responses raise their hands and read the responses. The group decides whether the responses are appropriate or not.

The teachers were also provided with various examples of social situations to put on task cards. The cards can be given to the students to allow them to practice in pairs using the language from the unit. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4

Social Situation Cards

A. You invite a co-worker to come to your house for dinner. You really want this person to come.

B. You are talking to a co-worker. You don't really like this person, but you don't want to hurt his/her feelings.

The objective in all of the activities introduced during teacher training was to encourage practice and application of appropriate language patterns in specific social situations. After teaching the new Social Language unit, the teachers developed some excellent activities of their own, which they shared in training workshops. The teachers presented ways to spiral social language continuously throughout the units in the ESL curriculum, such as those which deal with the telephone, time, health, housing and employment. Supervisors have also made tapes of listening activities, which the teachers use frequently in class. We hope to produce more. Teachers and supervisors continue to develop new activities and teaching materials for the Social Language unit.

In spite of the difficulties in learning the cultural aspects of the new unit, there are signs that teachers and students are absorbing social language. In daily contacts, supervisors have noticed that teachers are using social language patterns in appropriate contexts. In fact, when making small talk with a supervisor, after "bumming a cigarette," or explaining, "I'm sorry, but...," teachers will often jokingly remark, "I'm just practicing social language." Teachers often include small talk with their students at the beginning of their classes when they take attendance, and the students practice social language during supervisors' regular classroom visits. In general, much more social language is being used around Galang these days.

***Jon Phillips** is an ESL supervisor at the Galang Refugee Processing Center in Indonesia. He has taught English in Nepal, West Africa, and Puerto Rico. With the other ESL staff members on Galang, he has developed several videotapes that can be used when teaching the Social Language unit described in this article.*

***Diane Cribbs** is an ESL supervisor at the Galang Refugee Processing Center in Indonesia. She has taught ESL to Southeast Asian refugees in Tucson, Arizona, and has taught EFL in Japan and Indonesia.*